



M0055744K

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

HEGEMONY AND CULTURE :

Precepts for a Revolutionary Culture in the writings of Antonio Gramsci

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO:

THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN & COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

AND

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART

DEPARTMENT OF SCULPTURE

BY

KEVIN KELLY

MARCH 1988

CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter:	
1. Gramsci's Concept of Hegemony	4
2. The Position of the Intellectuals	8
3. Gramsci's Cultural Writings	13
4. Art History and Hegemony	18
5. Notes on the Theoretical Debate	23
6. Conclusion	29
Bibliography	30

Introduction.

The vast majority of "Western Marxists", to emerge after the 1920's have been consistently involved in cultural debates. It was not the State or Law which provided the typical objects of their research, but art and culture. This shift in emphasis is represented in the writings of such major Marxist writers, as G.Lukacs, W.Benjamin, and T.Adorno. It has been said that the defeat of revolutionary politics in the West, after the 1920's, had forced Marxists to reconsider the strength of Capitalist governments.¹ The result was that "Western Marxism", when it proceeded beyond questions of method to matters of substance, came to concentrate overwhelmingly on the study of superstructures.² It had become evident to most Marxist thinkers that the 'deterministic' view that the class struggle would eventually result in the overthrow of Capitalism, was insufficient in itself. Capitalism had survived the revolutionary ferment (of the 1920's) and it was becoming even more entrenched in Western countries. A distinct shift in Marxist thinking occurred; giving rise to an increased interest in ideas and culture and their capacity to form the consciousness of the people.

The writings of Antonio Gramsci have occupied a key position in the development of recent cultural theory. Gramsci was one of the first "Western Marxists" to explicitly theorise areas, within the sphere of the superstructure, in their relationship to the maintenance or subversion of social order.³ He considered the 'relative' autonomy and efficacy of cultural superstructures as a political problem. Moreover he was in a favourable position in which he could articulate the relationship between culture and politics because of his parallel activities as an academic linguist, theatre critic, journalist, Communist militant, and Marxist theoretician. Gramsci shared with Trotsky the belief that Socialism should redesign the whole aesthetic and cultural life as well as the social and political context. Within his work as a journalist Gramsci wrote extensively on issues of art and culture; ie. the theatre of Pirandello and the work of the "Futurists". Gramsci recognized that within the specific forms of the superstructures, culture, politics, and ideology have

"a relatively autonomous existence, irreducible to the status of 'emanations' of the economic structures" ⁴

He maintained that instead of the economic infrastructures determining cultural activity (a notion common to vulgar Marxists), ideas and economic forces interact mutually upon each other. Intellectual activities carried on within the

institutions (art, religion, education) which constitute the superstructure have a direct influence on politics through a process, which Gramsci calls "hegemony".

In this essay I intend to look at the writings of A. Gramsci, paying particular attention to his concept of hegemony. Following an examination of hegemony and the position of the intellectuals (chapter one and two respectively) it should be possible to place Gramsci's position as a cultural theorist in some perspective. (ie. in chapter three). From this I intend to move on to a more particular examination of the 'operations' of hegemony within the area of the institution of fine art and education (chapter four). The prestige of 'art' in society is often used to legitimate an oppressive social regime. For example, the artist, the central figure in art-historical discourse is often presented as an ineffable ideal which complements the bourgeois 'myth' of a universal classless man. For the final chapter of the essay (chapter five) I intend to draw together some strands of the theoretical debate which surrounds culture and social revolution and areas relating to counter-hegemony, in order to map out a context in which artists may be seen to be situated.

FOOTNOTES (Introduction)

1. Anderson, P., Considerations on Western Marxism ... p.79
2. ibid ... p.75
3. ibid ... p.79
4. Merrington, J., "Theory and Practice in Gramsci's Marxism", New Left Review (Ed.s), Western Marxism: A Critical Reader, ... p.144

Chapter 1.Gramsci's Concept of Hegemony.

The concept of hegemony emerged within the Russian socialist movement. Plekhanov and Axelrod were the first to employ the term in strategic discussions of the future leadership, by the working class, of a revolution in Russia. The concept of hegemony was to become of central importance in the writings of A. Gramsci who borrowed the term and transformed and extended its meaning to include new areas. Firstly, for Gramsci, the term came to designate interclass relationships, ie. the situation in which ruling classes come to form alliances with other subordinate classes. Secondly, Gramsci extended the use of the term to include areas within the cultural sphere. He maintained that hegemony prevails when ruling classes not only rule or 'direct' but also lead. In order to lead, without resorting to coercion, the ruling class must ensure that their direction or world view is agreeable to the whole of society. Gramsci's objective was to root out the class-bias associated with the ruling group. His explicit intentions in his study of hegemony was to:

examine the precise political, cultural and ideological forms through which, in any given society, a fundamental class is able to establish its leadership as distinct from more coercive forms of domination¹

In order to arrive at some conception of how Gramsci developed his notion of hegemony it is necessary to look, in some detail, at his methods of analysis in the political and cultural spheres.

Gramsci had recognized that economic 'crisis', in the West, could be contained by a political order which was established by hegemony. Only in moments of 'crisis' does the State have to act in a directly coercive fashion. This represents, to some extent, a breakdown in consent. Even then, the State, through its representatives, appeals to consensus opinion for its handling of the 'crisis' situation (manifest in such abstractions as the 'National interest' 'common good', etc.). Gramsci viewed the 'State', in the West, as just the "outer ditch" in a formidable network of "fortresses". The 'State' represented by its coercive elements, such as the Courts, police and the Army only come to the fore reluctantly, much of the work of consent or hegemony is carried on within the superstructures. In fact Gramsci posits the work of hegemony specifically within the orbit of 'civil society' in contradistinction to the 'State'.² For Gramsci 'civil society' was constituted by private institutions

such as the Church, schools, and trade unions, whereas the State or 'political society' consists of public institutions such as the Courts, police and Army. It was Gramsci's contention that social dominance must precede political domination. He was interested in trying to analyse the class relationships which occur in times of shifting power relations. These class alliances he often referred to as a 'historic bloc'.

In his attempt to understand and elaborate the hegemonic process, (where-by the rulers seem to have the consent of the ruled), Gramsci engaged in scientific and empirical study of historical material. In particular he examined events within Italian history. His model of hegemony is based on an interpretation of the way in which the Renaissance bourgeoisie, on coming to power in the 14th. century rejected the establishment and created their own intellectuals, ie. politicians, artists, scholars. Gramsci saw this model as a useful one by which the socialist movement could be encouraged. He posited a description of how the bourgeois, in order to propagate itself throughout society had to be seen to supercede their sectional, economic, and corporate interests, so that their aspirations as a class could become the dominant aspirations for the whole of society. The bourgeois deemed it necessary to;

"achieve a unision of economic and political aims
as well as intellectual and moral unity" ³

Hegemony can rarely be sustained by one single class stratum - almost always it requires an alliance with other class -fractions. By presenting their aspirations (through private institutions) as 'universal' aspirations they were able to form alliances with subordinate groups in society, (such as intellectuals from the aristocratic class). Having gained economic power the bourgeoisie sought institutional control to legitimate this position. This process was achieved, according to Gramsci, in part by the;

"Spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant group. This consent is 'historically' caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production". ⁴

The 'general direction of society', then, appears to favour the class in power. Attempts at challenging this direction would fall to the subordinate groups,

(more particularly those subordinate groups who have the least confidence in the ruling group). Because the bourgeois have gained strong positions within the institutions of 'civil society' it is here that the first attempts at challenging their domination could be made. Gramsci sees the bourgeois as a class in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the whole of society. The strength of bourgeois control lies in the fact that it has achieved a kind of consent by uniting different class strata. It has succeeded in uniting different ideological elements from varying sources. But the hegemonic class will be the class which will articulate and direct social life. Hegemony then is not 'universal' and 'given' to the particular class (ie. the bourgeoisie). Hegemony has to be won, worked for, reproduced and sustained. Hegemony, according to Gramsci, is a moving equilibrium. Therefore it needs to be reproduced and reinforced at each historical moment. Gramsci's theoretical and historical work in prison, (he was involved in more tactical issues before his imprisonment), is linked to the problem of how to win power from the dominant group, given that the prospect of a socialist revolution is in abeyance in the West. Direct "frontal confrontation" with the ruling class would now need to be delayed until such time as the socialist movement could gain hegemonic control. (Gramsci's theories have been used to justify 'reformism' or gradual takeover, but he himself was emphatic that a 'war' on both fronts was necessary ie. social and cultural).

Gramsci developed the notion of "the war of position" in which socialists should take over positions within the institutions, thereby lending credibility to the movement. Given the emphasis on cultural studies within Gramsci's body of work, it is evident that he considered the cultural sphere as a crucial arena in which the "war of position" could be waged. He was interested in bourgeois 'media' especially the Press, and the way in which all the organs of opinion were organized. Moreover, the organization of this sphere was largely the work of the intellectuals. Thus the intellectuals can be seen to act as the mediators for the dominant group. The intellectuals and the use of language are inseparable from Gramsci's concept of hegemony. The interaction of economic power, language structuring and intellectual mediation is responsible for securing bourgeois hegemonic control.

FOOTNOTES (Chapter 1)

1. Bennett, T., Martin, G., Mercer, C.B., Woollacott, J., (Eds.) Culture, Ideology and Social Processes; A Reader ... p.187
2. Merquior, J., Western Marxism ... p.100
3. Merrington, J., Theory and Practice in Gramsci's Marxism" Western Marxism; A Critical Reader New Left Review (Eds.) ... p.153
4. Gramsci, A., Selections from the Prison Notebooks

Chapter 2.The Position of the Intellectual.

When Gramsci came to deal with the position of the intellectuals in society he insisted on considering them within the context of a class structure. The intellectual is sometimes seen as an autonomous or unattached (ie. to class) figure, (eg. the scientist, as expert is often regarded as an independent figure involved in scientific progress, when it can be revealed that the 'products' of progress turn out to be 'commissioned' by the class with economic power). To tease out and articulate the position and function of the intellectual in society, Gramsci developed an extended concept of what constitutes an intellectual, stating that "all men/(women) are intellectuals", in that each person is able to elaborate a particular world view, but what distinguishes them is that;

"not all men/(women) have the function of intellectuals
in society" ¹

Moreover, all intellectuals belong to a particular class (they express and conform to a particular class/world view) which is either in power or is struggling to win power. The function of the intellectual in society is "directive" and/or organizational, ie. educative/intellectual. Gramsci divided his concept of the intellectuals into two main groups (a) "Traditional intellectuals" and (b) "Organic intellectuals". Traditional intellectuals are those intellectuals with which we would normally associate the term, ie. philosophers, scholars, teachers. A portion of those intellectuals have achieved what could be considered to be a 'relative autonomy' from the economic base. He insists that those intellectuals had, at one time in history, belonged to a class who were in power or were emerging to gain power. But they have now gained a certain autonomy and their support would need to be won over by an emerging class. The organic intellectuals, on the other hand, are organizers of hegemony in the making. These intellectuals are seen to be in, and for, their class. (regardless of which class that that may be) In the main they would include organizers of the subordinate classes such as trade unionists in relation to the working classes. The main function of the organic intellectual is to undermine the hegemony of the dominant group and to develop a counter-hegemonic strategy. Recognizing the importance of 'mediation' in history, Gramsci had little time for 'workerist' celebration of the intrinsic wisdom of the proletariat. The role of the organic intellectual was to bridge the gap between the workers and the ideas developed within the party. (ie. socialist party) Gramsci's advocacy of a greater role for the rank and file members of the party, was in opposition to the 'Leninist' view of a ruling 'elite'. Gramsci believed

that a new intellectual must rise from the organic intellectuals, who would be involved in ;

"active participation in practical life as constructor,
organizer, permanent persuader" ²

The organic intellectual needs to develop to a position where he (sic) can persuade and win over elements of the traditional intellectuals. Only then would it be possible for them to form a "historic bloc". Gramsci describes the relationship of the intellectual and the world of production, where it is:

"not as direct as it is with the fundamental group
(ie. the ruling group), but is in varying degrees
'mediated' by the fabric of society and by the complex
of superstructures of which the intellectuals are,
precisely the functionaries" ³

Because the bourgeois have situated their own organic intellectuals within the institutions (over the course of their rule) the traditional intellectuals (often springing from the bourgeois), are seen to function in their interests. The bourgeois organic intellectuals have been able to form a 'historic bloc' with the traditional intellectuals, and are in a position to mediate how they think society should function. Gramsci thought that it was imperative for the revolutionary movement to win over elements from the traditional and bourgeois intellectuals (often the same thing) and at the same time develop organic intellectuals of its own. Gramsci was concerned that intellectuals which were formed from subordinate groups were being absorbed by the dominant group. He gives the example of the priest who rises from his class but has to subordinate his own position to that of the Church. Another example is that of a capitalist entrepreneur who creates alongside himself an organic intellectual: the technician. The technician is often unable to develop as an organizer because he is being maintained by the capitalist. To develop as an organic intellectual the technician would need to be working in and for his/her own class.

Gramsci has criticized some philosophers for failing to create unity between the intellectual and the masses, ie. between theory and practice. This unity, he has suggested, would be possible:

"if the intellectual had been organically the intellectual of those masses, and if they had worked out and made coherent the principles and problems raised by the masses in their practical activity, that is their cultural and social bloc".⁴

Gramsci would have had little time for the 'critical' but unattached theories of writers such as T. Adorno et al. He believed that the choice and criticism of a conception of the world is a political matter, and as such there should be a direct relationship between theory and practice. He himself provides a good example of an organic intellectual. Coming from an impoverished rural background he continued to insist on an alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry. His insistence on this relationship was in opposition to other figures in the socialist movement who believed that the 'movement' should be confined to the industrially developed regions. In fact Gramsci believed that socialism would be defeated if it did not consider the whole of society, both town and country. Moreover the "philosophy of praxis" (his term for Marxism) needed to ground itself in 'common sense'. Common sense must be taken as the bedrock of philosophy. However it must be a kind of critical common sense. In his writings on The Study of Philosophy (SPN) he posed the question as to whether philosophy is right,

"when it is specialized culture or when (it is) involved in elaborating forms of thought superior to common sense"⁵

The concept of hegemony, nourished on his study of the "Italian Intellectuals", was further enriched by his background in linguistics. In Italy the problem of language and dialects was a particularly pertinent one, owing to the undigested nature of the country's unification. (during the time in which Gramsci was writing up to 80% of the population spoke dialects as distinct from the 'standard' Italian). Believing that in language there is contained a particular world view, he began studying language formation within the Italian state, eventually discerning a pattern in which a,

"dominant speech community exerted prestige over contiguois subordinate communities; the city over the surrounding countryside, the 'standard' over the dialect, the dominant socio-cultural over the subordinate one".⁶

Gramsci was adamant that education, of the people, was a vital task of the

intellectual. In the situation where those intellectuals are involved in establishing the 'standard' language from among many different dialects, it becomes important to be critically aware of how this process is carried out and who it benefits and so on. Gramsci has written that linguistic relations,

"are not only representations and historical traces of past and present power relations but are also paradigms for other relations of cultural influence and prestige, elaborated philosophical conceptions of the world over unelaborated folkloric ones high over popular literature" ⁷

In Italy much of what was to become 'standard' Italian was elaborated by intellectuals who favoured the 'literary' language of Dante, Boccaccio, etc. over other regional dialects. Gramsci however was not against the forming of a standard language but he was concerned that it could be a divisive exercise where people with unelaborated, folkloric conceptions of the world would be in a subordinate position and would be unable to systematically and politically organized.

FOOTNOTES (Chapter 2)

1. Gramsci, A., Selections from the Prison Notebooks ... p.9
2. *ibid* ... p.10
3. *ibid* ... p.12
4. *ibid* ... p.330
5. *ibid* ... p.330
6. Forgas, D., Nowell-Smith, G., "Introduction Chapter V" Selections from Cultural Writings, ... p.164
7. *ibid* ... p.165

(Chapter 3)

Gramsci's Cultural Writings.

"Art, it is said, is not a mirror, but a hammer:
it does not reflect, it shapes". L. Trotsky ¹

The idea that a cultural front was necessary alongside the merely economic and political ones, is I think indicative of Gramsci's belief in culture as a revolutionary means for shaping ideas and consciousness. However Gramsci did not have much to say on the effects of the new media such as film and radio. Only in his writings on the theatre does he, in any way, deal with specific works of art. The emphasis Gramsci placed on culture was not so much a reflection of this concern with specific objects themselves, as with the "place culture occupies within a range of social practices".² An active engagement in intellectual activities outside of mainstream political discourse was viewed as a discipline which would benefit the Socialist Movement. Gramsci had brought culture into the arena of debate in order to ask the question; how is cultural change related to economic and political change? In an attempt to examine the relationship between culture and politics, he posited the study of culture as an effective model by which it would be possible to grasp an understanding of social change. He felt that such a process of analysis would be useful to active Socialists, as it would;

"accustom them to the organic search for truth and clarity and to applying the fundamental principles of a doctrine to every occasion".³

Gramsci was trying to divest culture of the traditional view ie. a view that sees culture as an academic backwater. He was trying to forefront culture, so that it could be used as a means of "mental self-discipline".⁴ He saw in the resolution of any cultural problem the potential resolution of problems within the social sphere. This active engagement in culture was seen as necessary for the Socialist Movement so that it would;

"not leave the job of weighing up our(their) varied activity to caprice, to the play of forces beyond our (their) comprehension".⁵

Within the concept of hegemony, culture is the site of control and mediation of dominance. A wholly educated and creative populace would have

the effect of unsettling this control. Gramsci wanted the educational system to provide all citizens with the 'standard' linguistic skills which would grant access to knowledge, communication, culture, and power. It was in this spirit that he helped to set up "The Institute of Proletarian Culture" in Turin (1920's). The "Institute" was based on its Russian counterpart "Proletkult". The I.P.C. was intimately connected with the "Factory Councils" which had been established in some Turin factories. Gramsci looked upon the "Factory Council Movement" as a model for a proletarian state. The effects of I.P.C. was that it involved workers in cultural discussions. Workers also contributed to "L'Ordine Nuovo" the journal of the Movement. Gramsci himself was one of its editors and contributors. The basic idea of the I.P.C. was to train a new type of proletarian intellectual and "thus wrest the privilege of education away from the bourgeoisie".⁶ What was required (by the Socialist Movement) was a kind of counter-hegemony that would undermine the power of bourgeois ideology. The worker intellectuals would do this by spreading Socialist ideas among the work force. Much of this optimism was crushed however when a massive strike by workers in Turin was 'put down' by the industrialists. Later, with the rise of fascism, it retreated into obscurity.

Gramsci did not however believe that a cultural revolution could succeed on its own, he always insisted on a "dual perspective", seeking to actualize cultural theory in relation to;

"a specific national experience and culture in order to present a global critique and challenge to existing social reality".⁷

The disjuncture of theory and practice was seen as the root cause of the failure of strategic options on the left. Proletkult was invoked (by Gramsci) as an example of an autonomous working class cultural organization. The Socialist weeklies (ie. Il Grido del Popolo, Avanti, L'Ordine Nuovo) had for a time become a hotbed for debates about the level of comprehension by the masses. Some Socialists were trying to adapt the level of their articles to suit the 'average' level of the audience. Gramsci was insistent that the object of the articles should be to educate the readers to a higher level where the;

"tone of the articles and the propaganda must always be just above this average level so that there is a stimulus to intellectual progress"

and it would also;

"consolidate their spirit in a higher critical perception
of history and the world in which they live and struggle" ⁹

Obviously the "higher critical perception of history" would need explication, via the organic intellectuals, if it was to have any effect in organizing practical activity.

The potential for culture to become 'revolutionary' is suggested in an article entitled Art and Culture when Gramsci states that;

"One must speak of a struggle for a new culture, that is for a new moral life that cannot but be intimately connected to a new intuition of life until it becomes a new way of feeling and seeing reality and therefore a world intimately ingrained in 'possible artists' and possible 'works of art'" ¹⁰

In calling for a 'new culture' old cultural structures would need to be overthrown, however he was not necessarily expecting the 'new art' to effect the overthrow on its own, but that art can only be "an effect of a new culture".¹¹ In his early writings he praised the Italian "Futurists" as cultural 'revolutionaries'. Their anarchic attitude to traditional bourgeoisie culture was seen as a liberatory activity, and possibly worthy of emulation by a proletarian cultural practice. However, he later retracted this enthusiasm because of the assimilation of "Futurist Art" by fascism.

In his Cultural Writings, Gramsci devoted much attention to aspects of popular culture, especially serial novels. He attacks 'high art' for trying to emulate styles of intellectual origins. He suggested that 'high art' could have made a better attempt to encompass popular culture;

"The most common prejudice is this: that the new literature has to identify itself with an artistic school of intellectual origins", ¹²

and he advocates

"that it sinks its roots into the humus of popular culture as it is, with its tastes and intellectual world, even if it is backward and conventional" ¹³

Gramsci was reacting to the absence of home-produced serial novels within Italy. Foreign novels had achieved mass popularity. Gramsci felt that these means could have been used as a way of carrying social messages. A possible development of this position (ie, in relation to popular forms) could be a critique of this form on its own terms, through its own mode of expression. This position would appear to be close to much recent 'media' based art practice, where the medium of television and popular films are used to subvert the genre. It is obvious that Gramsci had no clear idea as to what this new art should look like: one thing that is clear though is that he did not advocate direct didactic art,

"Art is educative in so far as it is art, but not in so far as it is 'educative art' " 14

Art alone was not going to change society, but Gramsci believed that by fighting to reform culture one comes to modify the 'content' of art;

"not from the outside (by professing a didactic, moralistic or prescriptive art) but from deep within, ^{because man is totally altered when} his feelings, his conceptions and the relationships of which man (woman) is the necessary expression are themselves altered". 15

The notion of culture as 'revolutionary' is explicit in Gramsci's writings. He viewed the situation as one in which a changed social sphere would change art and a changed art would help change society. Concepts and ideas within the cultural sphere are subject to change, in fact need to be altered in order that they become active in the social and economic sphere. The revolutionary potential of culture lies in its ability to transform consciousness. The demystification, through cultural analysis, of the ideological structure of class domination challenges the dominant group on the very site in which they seek to organize their hegemony: that is culture. The fact that the intellectuals are not neutral, because they are responsible for mediating the direction imposed on society by the dominant group, is significant because it allows for a re-evaluation of the position of intellectuals and the institutions within society.

FOOTNOTES (Chapter 3)

1. Trotsky, L., Frascina, F., Harrison, C., (Eds.) "Literature and Revolution" Modern Art and Modernism A Critical Anthology ... p.209
2. Forgacs, D., Novell-Smyth, G., (Eds.) "Introduction" Selections from Cultural Writings ... p.14
3. Gramsci, A., S.C.W. ... p.26
4. *ibid* ... p.17
5. *ibid* ... p.27
6. Collier, P., Collier, P., Timms, E., (Eds.) "Dreams of a revolutionary Culture", Visions and Blueprints: Avant-Garde Culture in Early 20th. Century Europe ... p.37
7. Merrington, J., Western Marxism: A Critical Reader ... p.144
8. Gramsci, A., S.C.W. ... p.33
9. *ibid* ... p.98
10. *ibid* ... p.98
11. *ibid* ... p.91
12. *ibid* ... p.189
13. *ibid* ... p.102
14. *ibid* ... p.107
15. *ibid* ... p.201

(Chapter 4)

Art Discourse and Hegemony.

"There is no document of civilization which is not
at the same time a document of barbarism". W. Benjamin ¹

Recent cultural theorists have used the notion of hegemony as a means by which they could analyse the role of culture in the reproduction and mediation of dominant ideologies. ² The bourgeois, as the dominant group, had by and large maintained consent for what is essentially an unequal and exploitative society. The ways in which they organized this consent led cultural theorists to a re-assessment of effects of advertising, film, T.V., journalism, as well as literature, fine art, and the educational system. The mode and distribution of information has, in the main, come under the control of private institutions and is closely associated with corporate business interests. Capitalist interests are more overtly displayed in the 'mass media' than in the more secluded art institutions, but nevertheless 'fine art' has become increasingly more vulnerable to commodification and exploitation by business interests because of the large amounts of sponsorship which is contributed by the private sector. Even in countries in which intellectual and/or artistic activities are controlled by the government, the success accruing to certain art_{forms};

"is still significant because it indicates the cultural
direction that the state would like to give to the nation" ³

The prestige of art in society is often used to exemplify the material effects of bourgeois ideologies. Museums and Galleries display the wealth of the nation in cultural terms as well as stabilizing the financial value of the same cultural treasures. Jon Bird describes the effect of the museum on the art market as a similar effect to that of the Bank on finance capital. ⁴ They act as "guarantors" for the value of cultural artifacts. The value of the artifacts on the market is stabilized by hierarchical classificatory procedures effected by scholarly treatment. The museums can also express power and wealth through their design as architectural constructions and locations (ie. in prestigious parts of capital cities). The neo-classical design of "The House of German Art" in Munich is a good example of this. Here, there was a very deliberate attempt to display the power and 'timelessness' of the "Third

Reich", through the emulation of classical architectural design. It is significant that museums and galleries in the public sphere represent a conservative tradition. J. Bird describes this as;

"the tendency of conservative Utopias to stress the past as a Utopian imminence contained within the present" ⁵

By stressing the past, the conservative tradition, and preserving it, the museums are complicit in legitimating the present social order. The cultured and civilized appearance displayed by the museums tries to cover up the sometimes barbarous acquisition of cultural treasures. In his Theses on the Philosophy of History W. Benjamin describes this process;

"Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures". ⁶

While this does seem an overly pessimistic view of the historical process, it does however place the acquisition of 'cultural treasures' in a political context. After all, much of the collection housed in the "British Museum" has been the result of 'pillages' carried out during colonial wars.

If it can be taken that museums and galleries, in the public sphere, represent the "banks" of cultural capital, the functionaries of museums can be seen to represent the "cashiers" of the system. The intellectuals, ie. scholars, curators, publicists etc. are in positions of responsibility. They have the job of interpreting the material in the collections. This opens up questions as to the relationship between art/artifacts and knowledge. J. Bird states that it is no longer possible to maintain the position of disinterested scholarship because;

"Whatever we do we are implicated in a politics of interpretation" ⁷

Much of the work of interpretation is carried on through language, in its written or spoken form. As we have seen in a previous chapter (chap.2), the formation of the intellectuals and language is class bound. Language carries with it, a particular world view. The construction of the 'standard' or 'canon' of art and literature must then be subjected to an analysis in order that bias might be

revealed. The compilation of the 'standard' or 'canon' is usually the preserve of the scholars and experts, and perhaps their positions as members of the dominant group might effect the way in which they construct the 'standard'. Subordinate groups in society would be at a disadvantage. This favouring of one world view over another is reflected in the construction of the fine art canon; for example women have suffered exclusion from the 'accepted' histories of art.* It is significant that women that are involved in a feminist art practice, represent a threat to the accepted 'standard'. Male hegemony within art-historical discourse does not give up easily. G. Pollock has said the women engaged in this work are often subjected to criticism and abuse;

"mostly from men whose 'hegemony' is threatened by the fact that women are beginning to articulate another common sense",⁸

The artist, as the central figure in art-historical discourse, has been used in the hegemonic process to represent an ideal which complements the bourgeois' myths of a universal, classless man. This myth relegates subordinate groups to inferior positions. The male artist is seen as gender-free therefore he can aspire to notions of universality, while women are defined by their sex their work is seen to be partial and therefore cannot make claim to universal meaning. The artist

* "A painting bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a work by the neo-classical master J.L. David (1748-1825). As such it received fulsome praise from international connoisseurs and scholars. However, in 1951 C. Sterling published an article in the Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin tentatively re-attributing the painting to Constance Charpentier (1767-1849). Since then the way the picture is seen has changed dramatically. In 1964, J. Laver, for example, wrote; "Although the painting is extremely attractive as a period piece, there are certain weaknesses of which a painter of David's calibre would not have been guilty". The painting was subsequently decreased in value. (see Parker, R., and Pollock, G., p. 106) Old Mistresses, Women, Art and Ideology

seen as a free or autonomous individual in society, is put forward as an apolitical being, while in fact with or without their complicity their position, as constructed in bourgeois art-historical discourse, can be used to legitimate the capitalist system. He/she represents the ideal of the competitive 'free' individual which is the stock and trade of the capitalist entrepreneurship. This myth of the artistic genius serves to desocialise the production of art, and as G. Pollock has noted;

(serves) "to disguise the facts of privilege and convention which regulate access to training and advancement. A product of a classed and gender-divided society, this idea of the artist is a veil for the inequalities which sustain its elites".⁹

1. ...
2. ...
3. ...
4. ...
5. ...
6. ...
7. ...
8. ...
9. ...

revelled. The conception of the 'standard' or 'canon' is usually the preserve of the scholars and experts, and perhaps their positions as members of the dominant group might affect the way in which they construct the 'standard'. Subordinate groups in society would be at a disadvantage. This favouring of one world view over another is reflected in the construction of the fine art canon; for example women have suffered exclusion from the 'accepted' histories of art. It is significant that women that are involved in a feminist art practice, represent a threat to the accepted 'standard'. Male hegemony within art-historical discourse does not give up easily. Pollock has said the women engaged in this work are often subjected to criticism and abuse;

"mostly from men whose 'hegemony' is threatened by the fact that women are beginning to articulate another common sense".⁸

The artist, as the central figure in art-historical discourse, has been used in the hegemonic process to represent an ideal which complements the patriarchal system of a universal, classless man. This myth relegates subordinate groups to inferior positions. The male artist is seen as gender-free therefore he can aspire to notions of universality, while women are defined by their sex their work is seen to be partial and therefore cannot claim to universal meaning. The artist

* "A painting peddled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art as a work by the neo-classical master J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) ... as such it received false praise from international commentators and scholars. However, in 1971 C. Steinhilber published an article in the Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin tentatively re-attributing the painting to Consuelo Chantler (1871-1893). Since then the way the picture is seen has changed dramatically. In 1984, J. Baver, for example, wrote: "Although the painting is extremely attractive as a period piece, there are certain weaknesses of which a painter of Davis's calibre would not have been guilty". The painting was subsequently deaccessioned in 1986. (see Barker, B., and Pollock, G., p.106)

seen as a free or autonomous individual in society, is put forward as an apolitical being, while in fact with or without their complicity, their position, as constructed in bourgeois art-historical discourse, can be used to reinforce the capitalist system. He/she represents the ideal of the competitive 'free' individual within the stock and trade of the capitalist entrepreneurship. This myth of the artistic genius serves to devalue the production of art, and as Pollock has noted;

FOOTNOTES (Chapter 4)

1. Benjamin, W., Illuminations ... p.258
2. Hall, S., et al and Bird, J., in "Art History and Hegemony" Block 12
3. Gramsci, A., Selections from Cultural Writings ... p.113
4. Bird, J., "Art History and Hegemony" Block 12 winter 1986/87 ... p.37
5. *ibid* ... p.31
6. Benjamin, W., Illuminations ... p.258
7. *ibid* ... p.39
8. Pollock, G., Parker, R., Pollock, G., (Eds.) "Feminism and Modernism" Framing Feminism ... p.80
9. *ibid* ... p.85

The resistance of the leadership and control of society in the West, by the dominant group, was shown to be sustained by their economic power in the social sphere and reinforced, even legitimated by their intellectuals, in the cultural sphere. The effects of dominant-group-ideologies today, has become even more pervasive due to the hegemony exerted in the 'communications networks', by multinational corporations. The increasingly 'global' organization of the world into a seamless web of media technology³ has led many of the 'Western Marxists' to lament the effects of the 'Culture Industry' on the minds of the masses. In their joint work Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer ridiculed the 'Culture Industry' because they felt that it was producing a form of 'mass deception'. Adorno / Horkheimer poured scorn on the 'Culture Industry' for reducing the masses to a 'cuffed' state. For example, one of Adorno's parables for filmgoers was of 'passive victims in the dark'.⁴ Adorno feared that 'culture' was being used to keep people into passive acceptance of their social conditions stating that

"Culture has always played its part in taming revolutionary and barbaric instincts (and) that industrial culture adds its contribution"⁵

(Chapter 5)

Notes on the Theoretical Debate.

The social responsibilities of the intellectual (as organizer and educator) and some of the dynamics between culture and politics, have been discussed in previous chapters. In this chapter I intend to discuss Gramsci's theory in relation to some of the other major "Western Marxists" ie. T. Adorno, G. Lukacs, and B. Brecht.

From the start it must be noted that Gramsci had little or no contact with these other Marxist writers. His own theoretical writings - The Prison Notebooks (Critical Edition)¹ became fully available in the 1970's. Due to his imprisonment Gramsci was effectively cut off from the major debates which were taking place outside Italy. In many respects Gramsci's situation has had the effect of insulating him from the 'crisis' in Marxist circles following the rise of Stalin in Russia. Furthermore, his death in 1937, denied Gramsci the opportunity of engaging in issues arising from the "Cold War" situation. The work of Adorno and Lukacs was deeply affected by the division of the West into two antagonistic camps. Lukacs continued to work within the Eastern bloc, while Adorno moved to the U.S.A. to avoid the rigours of the Nazi era. Both Lukacs and Adorno were forced in part, to adapt their work to suit the ideologies of their adoptive countries.¹

The resilience of the leadership and control of society in the West, by the dominant group, was shown to be sustained by their economic power in the social sphere and reinforced, even legitimated by their intellectuals, in the cultural sphere. The effects of dominant-group-ideologies today, has become even more pervasive due to the hegemony exerted in the 'communications networks', by multi-national corporations. The increasingly "closed organization of the world into a seamless web of media technology"² had led many of the "Western Marxists" to lament the effects of the "Culture Industry" on the minds of the masses. In their joint work Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer ridiculed the "Culture Industry" because they felt that it was producing a form of "mass deception".³ Adorno / Horkheimer poured scorn on the "Culture Industry" for reducing the masses to a 'reified' state. For example, one of Adorno's phrases for filmgoers was an "audience of victims in the dark".⁴ Adorno feared that 'culture' was being used to dupe people into passive acceptance of their social conditions stating that;

"Culture has always played its part in taming revolutionary and barbaric instincts (and) that industrial culture adds its contribution"⁵

In his writings on theatres Gramsci had, in his time, reacted with displeasure to the takeover of theatres by business interests (ie. large Car manufacturers and Industrialists). He felt that the commercialization of the theatre halls would lessen the revolutionary potential of the artistic productions. However Gramsci did not share the pessimistic view of 'popular' culture adhered to by Adorno et al. Rather, he acknowledged the influence of popular culture on the masses, advocating a use of these popular forms as a vehicle for counter-hegemonic (left-wing) cultural practice. (Note his suggestion that (left) artists/writers, "sink their roots" in the "humus of popular culture"). Admittedly Gramsci was concerned here, with a particular form of practice, ie. serial novels (a now largely out-dated form), while Adorno et al. were trying to contend with the proliferation of 'new media' such as film, radio etc. Nevertheless, Gramsci did envision a use for popular culture within left cultural practice, despite "its tendencies" and "conventions", unlike Adorno et al who rejected any potential 'progressive' use of the products of the 'culture industry'. This may have been due to the fact that Gramsci, as distinct from the other Western Marxists, never developed a theory of reification or alienation.⁶

The major debate on aesthetics and politics in Western Marxism took place in Gramsci's absence. It occurred between the 1930's and 1950's, between Adorno, Lukacs, Brecht, Benjamin and Bloch. The debate centred on the dichotomy between realism and modernism and their respective usage in art practice. Lukacs defended a form of 'critical realism' while Adorno favoured a more 'autonomous' art. Lukacs defended 'realism' against what he considered to be the 'Modernist' tendency, to fragment and distort images of reality. He extolled writers such as Balzac, Tolstoy and T.Mann to support his idea of the 'classic realists' practice. Adorno, on the other hand, championed modernist writers such as Beckett, Joyce, and Kafka for their ability to produce art which articulated;

"the negative knowledge of the actual world"⁷

Adorno believed that 'realist art' works;

"merely assimilate themselves to the brute existence
against which they protest"⁸

Lukac's theory (a kind of reflection - theory) maintains that 'realist' art is better able to 'reflect' the real situation of social life and that modernist works;

"were grossly distorted transcripts, unconscionable travesties of objective reality" ⁹

Adorno however, was adamant that the "shock of the unintelligible" can communicate the real nature of social life without resorting to an "imitation of empirical reality". Lukacs reacted against an 'autonomous' practice seeing it as part of the ideology of a Capitalist society:

"the movement of its individual components towards autonomy is an objective fact of the Capitalist economic system. Nevertheless this autonomy constitutes only one part of the overall process. The underlying unity, the totality, all of whose parts are objectively inter-related", ¹⁰

The theory and practice of Bertolt Brecht lies somewhere between that of Lukacs and Adorno. Brecht had developed a kind of 'critical realism' which was in some ways close to Lukacs's ideas, while his use of 'distancing' or 'alienation effects' are closer to the modernist tradition and therefore to the theories of Adorno. Realism, for Brecht, was not to be equated with 'naturalism' as Brecht posited his practice as a useful means for revealing, through images, the 'inner nature' of Capitalism. Like Gramsci, Brecht believed that by taking 'reality' and transforming it, through art, it could be possible to show that 'reality' itself and the meanings which accrue to it is alterable. Gramsci's idea, that in the solution of cultural problems lies the potential solution of social problems, is close to Brecht's theory that culture (ie. books, pictures, theatre, film etc.);

"can and must contribute decisively to the solution of the Nation's vital problems" ¹¹

However, Adorno was critical of Brecht's mixture of art and politics. He felt that, in some of his works, Brecht was guilty of trivializing politics. In a critical attack on Brecht's play about a dictator "Arturo Ui" Adorno says that;

"for the sake of political commitment, political reality is trivialized: which then reduces the political effect" ¹²

He goes on to state that;

"political falsehood stains the aesthetic form" ¹³

But for all that, part of the value of Brecht lies in his ability to put into practice what he expounds in his theoretical writings. Adorno's adherence to the 'autonomous' artwork is, arguably, tainted with mystical overtones. This kind of belief in the artwork as the only authentic expression of real social conditions, can be seen to be ultimately elitist, and can lead to the commodification and misappropriation of the work in oppressive ideologies. On the other hand Lukac's concept of realist art as a progressive practice is contradicted by his adherence to a narrowly defined selection of classical works, which were the "products of a particular class history, now superseded".¹⁴ In fact it has been argued that:

"The contradiction between 'high' and 'low' genres, the one subjectively progressive and objectively elitist, the other objectively popular and subjectively regressive has never been durably overcome" ¹⁵

Nevertheless the debates around aesthetics and politics still have some relevance for the position of the artist vis a vis cultural and social change. Many of the insights gained from the legacy of "Western Marxism" can still be applied to contemporary cultural practices. For example, Adorno's contention that;

"The so-called artistic representations of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle-butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it", ¹⁶

is particularly pertinent when one considers such work as that of the artist Leon Golub. Some of Golub's paintings depict soldiers engaged in acts of brutality. Perhaps contrary to Golub's intentions it could be possible to 'enjoy' this work, while identifying with the victimizer, rather than be concerned with the plight of the victims.

One of the main criticisms levelled at Western Marxists such as Adorno has been that, whilst engaged in complex theoretical debates, they have remained secluded within academia, turning their backs on pragmatic political situations. Gramsci, however, can be seen to differ significantly in this respect. He consistently maintained a 'dual perspective' ie. a war on both fronts - arguing for a tactical engagement with politics as well as a critical and counter-hegemonic activity within the cultural spheres.

Marxist-based critics have, however, become very influential within cultural institutions and discourses, so much so that the situation has prompted one right-wing critic, Hilton Kramer, to declare that the left-wing intellectuals have had:

"an immense and baleful influence on American life" 17

In the same article he goes on to express his fears of their counter-hegemonic activity:

"they are to be found in significant numbers inside these institutions, in many cases actually running them and defining their Goals" 18

This situation does seem to represent a successful counter-hegemonic attempt, by left-wing intellectuals, to infiltrate cultural institutions. However it does beg the question, after Gramsci, as to the reasons why their activities have not had any significant effect in the political sphere. (Evidenced by the consolidation of right-wing governments as represented by Reagan and Thatcher). It would seem that left-wing intellectuals have, in many ways, marginalized themselves. Nothing has more effectively discredited Marxism than the practice of affixing "class labels (for example 'petty bourgeois') to textual or intellectual art objects" 19 and dismissing them outright. Some of the theory / theorists also suffer from an excessive and overly negative view of contemporary life, which can be seen to be ultimately fatalistic and politically disabling.

FOOTNOTES (Chapter 5)

1. Adorno's article, "Reconciliation Under Duress" Aesthetics and Politics, an attack on the theories of Lukacs, which was originally published in Die Monat, a journal created by the U.S. Army in West Germany and financed by the Central Intelligence Agency, could be said to be a case in point, in which Adorno was 'unwittingly' yielding to the authorities. While Lukacs on the other hand is often charged, in his later work, with an overly compliant attitude to Socialist Realist dogma.
2. Anderson, P., Livingstone, R., Mulhern, F., "Presentation 1" Aesthetics and Politics 1986 ... p.208
3. Adorno, T., Horkheimer, M., "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" Dialectic of Enlightenment
4. *ibid* ... p.182
5. *ibid* ... p.154
6. There is a conspicuous absence of a developed concept of reification and alienation in the work of Gramsci, unlike Adorno and Lukacs who were consistently involved with the concept and viewed reification as the effect of the culture industry on the consciousness of the masses. Lukacs coined the term reification in his book The History of Class Consciousness 1928, to refer to a situation in which people are so alienated from their real conditions of existence, that they are unaware of their alienation, therefore they are reified. The notion gained considerable usage in the analysis of the culture industry, by Western Marxists, ie. Adorno and Horkheimer.
7. Adorno, T., "Reconciliation Under Duress" Aesthetics and Politics ... p.160
8. Adorno, T., "Commitment", Aesthetics and Politics ... p.179
9. Anderson, P., Livingstone, R., Mulhern, F., "Presentation 1V" Aesthetics and Politics ... p.145
10. Lukacs, G., "Realism in the Balance" Aesthetics and Politics ... p.32
11. Brecht, B., Brecht on Theatre ... p.223
12. Adorno, T., "Commitment", Aesthetics and Politics ... p.185
13. *ibid* ... p.156
14. Anderson, P., Livingstone, R., Mulhern, F., "Presentation 11", Aesthetics and Politics ... p.63
15. *ibid* ... p.66
16. Adorno, T., "Commitment" Aesthetics and Politics ... p.181
17. Kramer, H., "Last - or Lost - Intellectuals?" The New Criterion: December 1987 ... p.1.
18. *ibid*
19. Jameson, F., "Reflections in Conclusion" Aesthetics and Politics ... p.201

(Chapter 6)

Conclusion.

In conclusion, the position which the artist holds in society, according to Gramsci, is that of intellectual. Moreover in order to create and maintain an effective counter-hegemonic practice, the artist needs to resist absorption into the dominant ideology, and develop as an "organic intellectual". However, to pursue this strategy, the artist needs to simultaneously occupy a position both within and in opposition to dominant discourses. Clearly artists involved in this endeavour cannot afford to remain in isolation as they can too easily be assimilated by the dominant ideology (as ahistorical, individual 'visionaries'). Given that the dominant ideology is produced and sustained across a range of discourses and institutions, it is obviously then, in the artists' interests to maintain an awareness of his/her position in a social context and form 'alliances' with other intellectuals active within the different spheres.

The articulation of political concerns, in works of art, does not moreover limit creative and aesthetic possibilities within the work, although with a transformation of the content the form too must be altered to a certain extent, if it is to be effective (by effective I mean a form of work that resists absorption into the dominant order). As the work of Brecht shows, art can be both politically effective (ie. that it can raise political consciousness) and artistically innovative. However, in a society in which the means of production and distribution of culture is the preserve of the few, its transformative power will inevitably be limited. What is necessary is a "war of position", waged on many different fronts (ie. cultural, economic, social, and political) in order to wrest control away from the dominant hegemonic group.

Bibliography.

- Adorno, T., Benjamin, W., Bloch, E., Lukacs, G., Aesthetics and Politics, London: Verso 2nd. edition 1986.
- Adorno, T., Horkheimer, M., Dialectic of Enlightenment, 1947.
- Anderson, P., Considerations on Western Marxism, London: Verso, 1984.
- Benjamin, W., Illuminations, London: Fontana/Collins.
- Bennett, T., Martin, G., Mercier, C., Woolacott, J., Culture, Ideology and Social Processes: A Reader, London: Open University Press, 1985.
- Bird, J., "Art History and Hegemony" Block 12, Winter 1986/87.
- Brecht, B., Brecht on Theatre, Willett, J., (trans), London: Methuen, 1986.
- Collier, P., Timms, E., (Eds.), Visions and Blueprints: Avant-Garde Culture in Early 20th. Century Europe, London: Nup., 1988.
- Frascina, F., Harrison, C., Modern Art and Modernism, London: Harper and Row, 1983.
- Gorz, A., Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism, London: Pluto Press, 1982.
- Gramsci, A., Selections from Prison Notebooks, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986.
- Gramsci, A., Forgas, D., Nowell-Smith, G., (Eds.), Selections from Cultural Writings, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985.
- Hall, S., Jefferson, T., (Eds.) Resistance through Rituals, Youth Subculture in Post-War Britain, London: Hutchinson & Company, 1976.
- Jay, M., Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984.
- Kramer, H., "Last/Lost Intellectuals?", The New Criterion, Dec. 1987.
- Merquior, J.G., Western Marxism, London: Paladin, 1986.
- Merrington, J., "Theory and Practice in Gramsci's Marxism", Western Marxism: A Critical Reader, London: Verso, 1977.
- Parker, R., Pollock, G., Old Mistresses, Women, Art and Ideology, London: Pandora, 1981.
- Wolff, J., The Social Production of Art, London: Macmillan, 1981.
- Parker, R., Pollock, G. (Eds) Framing Feminism, London: Pandora Press 1987